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Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
Seventy-first session

Summary record of the 1648th meeting
Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Friday, 2 November 2018, at 3 p.m.

Chair: Ms. Leinarte

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention (*continued*)

Combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (*continued*) (CEDAW/C/LAO/8-9; CEDAW/C/LAO/Q/8-9 and CEDAW/C/LAO/Q/8-9/Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic took places at the Committee table.*

Articles 10 to 14 (*continued*)

2. **Ms. Chantharanonh** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that the National Action Plan on Education for All 2003–2015 was being assessed as part of a comprehensive review of the education sector and that a new plan was being formulated. An administration fund had been set up for the benefit of all State schools. Disaggregated statistics on school attendance and dropout rates were available on the website of the Ministry of Education and Sports. However, no information was available on the number of children who had used facilities built thanks to investments in school infrastructure. Programmes were in place to train learning support assistants who were fluent in ethnic minority languages.

3. The target of 25 per cent for the proportion of recipients of State subsidies for vocational education who were women was considered to be realistic and did not in any way prevent the achievement of a higher figure. Regarding adult literacy, a successful programme had been carried out at the village level. Under the amended Law on Education of 2015, the school leaving age had been set at 14 years, in line with the minimum age for employment.

4. **Ms. Phonethip** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that sexual violence, including sexual harassment in the workplace, was one of four types of violence defined in article 12 of the Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children, the others being physical violence, psychological violence and economic abuse. According to data from the Centre for Counselling and Protection of Women and Children of the Central Lao Women's Union, in 2016–2017, there had not been any complaints of sexual harassment in the workplace. The Centre had provided support in 712 cases, in which some of the main issues had been divorce, marital property disputes and physical abuse. Perpetrators of sexual harassment in the workplace were punishable in accordance with article 12 of the Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children.

5. **Ms. Kittavong** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that, to implement the gender equality workplan of the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had established a ministerial commission for the advancement of women composed of 13 members, 6 of whom were women. There were currently five women ambassadors, and 30 per cent of all diplomats were women.

6. The Lao People's Democratic Republic had ratified five of the eight fundamental Conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO), namely the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100), the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182). Studies were being conducted with a view to the possible future ratification of the Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183).

7. **Ms. Prathoumvanh** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that the retirement age was 60 years for both men and women, though women had the option of taking early retirement starting at the age of 55 years. Maternity leave lasted five months and paternity leave, one week. Fathers could be granted additional leave on an exceptional basis if their child required hospital treatment.

8. **Ms. Phonethip** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that article 45 of the amended Labour Law of 2013 enshrined the principle of equal pay for work of equal value

without any discrimination as to race, nationality, sex, age, religion, belief or socioeconomic status. That law also set out the minimum wages for rural and urban areas, compliance with which was monitored by trade unions.

9. **Ms. Gbedemah** said that, for the purpose of designing targeted measures, it was crucial to gather statistics on the number of cases in which pregnancy had been cited as the main reason for dropping out of school and on the number of children who had used facilities built thanks to investments in school infrastructure.

10. The 25-per-cent target for the proportion of recipients of vocational education subsidies who were women was too low; the message it conveyed was that such a percentage was appropriate.

11. The State party should study techniques and methodologies for handling multigrade classrooms, which were sometimes inevitable, particularly in rural areas with inadequate infrastructure. It should also adopt measures to change traditional attitudes concerning girls' role in the home and to encourage girls to do their homework at school.

12. While the recent increase in the number of women and girls entering vocational education was impressive, she would like to receive data disaggregated by subject, to see whether there had been a corresponding rise in the number of women and girls pursuing traditionally male-dominated careers.

13. **Mr. Bergby** said that he would be grateful for statistics on the gender pay gap in the State party, and asked whether, during inspections to ensure the effective implementation of minimum wage provisions, compliance with equal pay provisions was also monitored.

14. He would be interested to learn more about the programme concerning labour standards in the garment sector, mentioned in paragraph 65 of the State party's replies to the list of issues (CEDAW/C/LAO/Q/8-9/Add.1). In particular, he wished to know what the outcome of the programme had been, what use would be made of the results obtained and whether there were plans to expand the programme to cover the whole garment industry. Some reflections on why the duration of compulsory maternity leave after giving birth was only 42 days would also be appreciated.

15. **Ms. Phonethip** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that official figures on the gender pay gap were not currently available. However, the adoption of the amended Labour Law of 2013 reaffirmed the Government's commitment to upholding the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. Mr. Bergby's comments on maternity leave would be looked at carefully.

16. **Ms. Chantharanonh** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that statistics on school attendance and dropout rates and on investments in school infrastructure would be submitted to the Committee in writing.

17. **Ms. Phonethip** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that the programme on labour standards in the garment sector had been implemented by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, which would need to be consulted before relevant information could be provided.

18. **Ms. Arocha Domínguez** said that she welcomed the State party's Eighth Health Sector Development Plan for the period 2016–2020 and the progress made during the reporting period with regard to several health indicators. However, a number of challenges remained. It would be useful to receive information on the specific causes of women's mortality and morbidity and to know what percentage of all deaths among women were maternal deaths. Details of programmes to prevent and treat breast and cervical cancer would also be appreciated.

19. Noting that the maternal mortality ratio in the State party remained very high, she asked what could be done to accelerate the reduction of that ratio, especially in remote and rural areas. She also asked how many maternal deaths were caused by abortion and how many abortions had been performed in cases where the life of the mother had been at risk, with that being the only recognized ground for legal termination of pregnancy in the State party. The delegation should explain whether abortion was accessible to women and girls, and provide information on clandestine and unsafe abortions, if any was available. In

particular, she wished to know how many maternal deaths were attributable to such abortions and whether there were plans to decriminalize abortion in cases of rape or incest, and in cases where the woman's mental health was endangered.

20. She did not get the impression, from reading the State party's report (CEDAW/C/LAO/8-9), that sex education was given the necessary priority by the Government. She would like to hear from the delegation in that regard.

21. Lastly, concerning HIV/AIDS, she asked why the prevalence among women was comparatively high, whether there were any specific programmes in place to protect women in at-risk groups and whether the laudable efforts of the AIDS Prevention Centre could continue to be funded in the event that the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria withdrew its financial backing.

22. **Ms. Chantharanonh** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that the high maternal mortality ratio was caused in part by the fact that, during the rainy season, the flooding of roads in rural areas made it difficult to transfer pregnant women to hospitals and health centres where they could give birth in safe conditions. In order to address that problem, a programme had been established whereby health workers in villages monitored the health of pregnant women and took steps to ensure that they received the necessary care. Under the same programme, villages were provided with basic medical equipment. Abortion was prohibited by law except in cases where the pregnancy posed a threat to the woman's health. Steps were being taken to collect data on the number of legal abortions that took place every year.

23. Information on the prevention of HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases was provided to young people through mobile clinics and school visits that took place on World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day. Mobile clinics provided young people with screening for HIV/AIDS and other conditions. Health clinics established by the Lao Women's Union provided information to women on the prevention of communicable diseases, and sex education was taught through the media and educational programmes. Under HIV/AIDS prevention programmes, free condoms were distributed in bars, restaurants and other service outlets.

24. **Ms. Phonethip** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that the Ministry of Health, in conjunction with the Government of Luxembourg, the United Nations Children's Fund, the World Health Organization and the World Bank, was taking steps to train 1,500 midwives to work in health-care centres and district hospitals. The Ministry of Health was also carrying out a pilot project aimed at increasing support for pregnant women in remote areas. Sex education was provided to young people through radio programmes broadcast every Saturday and Sunday evening on the national radio station. Lastly, abortion was not permitted unless the pregnant woman's health was affected, including in cases where the pregnancy had been caused by rape.

25. **Ms. Arocha Domínguez** said that the Committee would welcome information on women's health issues other than those related to sexual and reproductive health. In particular, it would like to know how the main causes of morbidity and mortality for women compared to those for men and what impact the maternal mortality ratio had on the overall mortality rate for women. Given that incest or rape could cause serious harm to a woman's psychological health, she asked whether the Government would consider lifting the ban on abortion in cases where the pregnancy posed a threat to the woman's mental health. In view of the health risks faced by surrogate mothers, particularly when they were pressured into undergoing several pregnancies in close succession, the Government should ensure that any new law on surrogate pregnancy took such risks into account.

26. **Ms. Chantharanonh** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that the Government did not currently collect data on women's mortality in general.

27. **Ms. Bethel**, noting that most women who were poor or who worked in the informal economy had no social protection, said that she wished to know what measures were being taken to raise awareness, in all geographical areas, of women's rights under the law on social security. The State party should ensure that any such awareness-raising campaigns were conducted in the languages of the communities at which they were targeted.

28. The Committee would be interested to learn whether the State party would consider providing social protection to women in the informal and rural economies through the introduction of cash benefits for pregnant women, new mothers, women with disabilities and older women. She wondered whether the State party had incorporated gender equality concepts into all State-run agricultural initiatives, whether women's agricultural collectives were a key target beneficiary of economic benefits and whether such collectives played an equal role in decision-making in the agricultural sector.

29. The Committee would welcome information on the measures being taken to extend social security coverage to women in agricultural work who were unable to make voluntary contributions to the social security programme. What steps were being taken to establish a social protection floor in line with the ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202)?

30. As women often faced barriers to financial resources and land acquisition, it would be interesting to learn what steps were being taken to ensure the sustainability of the support provided by women's savings groups and the Microfinance Institute and to facilitate access to financial resources, land use, landownership and income-generating activities. She wondered what measures would be taken to strengthen access to credit, control and ownership of assets and training in micro-business development and management and whether the Government would consider using temporary special measures to encourage more young women, rural women, women heads of household and women with disabilities to enter competitive markets and engage in income-generating activities.

31. Noting that women bore a disproportionate share of the burden of unpaid care work, she asked what was being done to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work carried out by women. In particular, she asked whether investments were being made in infrastructure and social services, including childcare, care for older persons, health care, education and transport. She wondered whether the State party had taken steps to collect quantitative data on women's unpaid work in the home and in family businesses and to ensure that such data were reflected in the gross domestic product. Had the Government adopted measures to promote the equal sharing of housework and childcare between parents?

32. Given that large-scale, long-term land leases and concessions to domestic and foreign investors often resulted in serious violations of women's rights, she asked whether the State party would consider increasing the transparency and accountability of the current system for approving and managing such arrangements. It would be interesting to learn whether the Government would consider creating an agency for effectively and impartially resolving land-related grievances and enforcing relevant laws and regulations. What was being done to address the environmental damage caused by mining and logging operations that depleted the country's natural resources and adversely affected women's right to a sustainable livelihood?

33. Noting that migrant workers wishing to enrol in social protection schemes faced significant obstacles, including documentation requirements, minimum qualifying periods and sectoral exclusions from social coverage, she asked what the Government was doing to facilitate access to such schemes for women migrant workers.

34. **Ms. Hofmeister** said that the Committee wished to know how the situation of rural women and girls compared with that of men in rural and remote areas. In the light of the Committee's general recommendation No. 34 (2016) on the rights of rural women, it would be interesting to receive information on campaigns aimed at raising awareness of women's rights, including their rights to fair pay for agricultural work and access to personal documents, health, health-care services, housing, landownership and reparations for the loss of land appropriated for public projects and mining operations.

35. As women and girls with disabilities were often subjected to multiple forms of discrimination, she asked what steps were being taken to enhance their access to inclusive education, health care, social welfare and transport in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It would be interesting to learn whether a specific budget was allocated to the empowerment

of women and girls with disabilities and, if so, what the size of that budget was. She wondered whether assistance and rehabilitation were provided to women and girls who were victims of accidental explosions of ordnance and what was being done to reduce the risk posed by unexploded ordnance.

36. The Committee would welcome further information on any bilateral relations or agreements concerning migration and remigration between the State party and Thailand and on the treatment of the many ethnic and linguistic minorities living in the State party. The Committee wished to know what steps were being taken to decriminalize prostitution and combat the stigmatization of sex workers and persons living with HIV/AIDS. It would be interested in learning more about the situation of transgender women working in the sex industry and the treatment of lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex women by the police and State authorities.

37. **Ms. Prathoumvanh** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that campaigns to raise awareness of the rights of migrant workers were carried out on television, radio and other media. Lao citizens who were intending to migrate were advised to register with the authorities of the host country before migrating so that they could do so lawfully and reduce their risk of being subjected to labour exploitation or trafficking in persons. The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, the Lao Women's Union and various international organizations had cooperated to make a handbook on migration available to potential migrants. The Government had collaborated with the Governments of many Asian nations with a view to regularizing the status of migrant workers. National committees on migration had been created and officers representing the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare had been stationed in destination countries to help Lao migrants to regularize their status.

38. **Ms. Chantharanonh** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that poor families in rural areas and villages were entitled to free health care at all government-run health facilities. There were still no cash transfer programmes, but schooling was free, and scholarships were available to schoolchildren from poor families.

39. The Lao Women's Union, which operated at the village level, provided access to credit. The Agricultural Promotion Bank also extended credit to women. In addition, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry awarded grants to entrepreneurs, including women.

40. Efforts to combat poverty among women heads of household, rural women and women with disabilities were an integral part of the promotion of investment in rural areas. Such women were also among the intended beneficiaries of the loans extended by the Poverty Reduction Fund. Civil society organizations carried out training and capacity-building initiatives for women with disabilities to help ensure that they could find work.

41. Responsibility for childcare was shared in ways that differed from one part of the country to another. In rural areas, women generally took care of children and did household chores such as cooking, while men worked in the rice paddies. In urban areas, responsibility for childcare was shared more equally.

42. **Mr. Khammoungkhoun** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that Committee members should take into account the information provided in the periodic reports submitted by the Government, not information obtained from unofficial websites. In addition, as a sovereign nation, the Lao People's Democratic Republic was free to choose its own political system.

43. More than 2 million bombs, some 30 per cent of which remained unexploded, had been dropped on the country, and they continued to harm innocent people in rural areas. Many of the people risking their lives to clear the land of unexploded ordnance were women.

44. Foreign direct investment and special economic zones were key drivers of the country's development. Land leases and concessions were regulated by a number of laws and official bodies. Steps had been taken to attract foreign direct investment, but at the same time the Government defended the interests of the local communities affected by economic development projects. A complaints mechanism was available to people who

were dissatisfied with the compensation they had received for the use of their land or other resources. The interests of the nation, however, would prevail over those of the individual.

45. Many villagers who had initially been reluctant to make way for development projects had later found themselves happier in the areas in which they had been resettled, not least because living conditions were better and their children's futures were brighter. Lengthy negotiations had culminated in the recent payment of compensation to 80 families affected by the Lao–China Railway Project. A prime ministerial decree, which was strictly enforced, had been issued to combat illegal logging.

46. **Ms. Bethel** said that it was still unclear to her what, if any, social and economic benefits were provided to workers outside the formal economy under the 2013 law on social security. She would welcome a reply to her earlier question as to whether the State-run institutions responsible for agricultural development initiatives had adopted a perspective that would ensure that women were equal actors and decision makers in agricultural development projects and that farming collectives were responsive to issues relating to gender equality. She welcomed the work of the Lao Women's Union in the country's villages but wondered what steps the State itself took to promote access to credit for women. She also wondered what was being done to raise awareness of the need for women to have help from their partners with domestic tasks so that they, too, could work for pay.

47. **Ms. Chantharanonh** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that, as she had noted earlier, free health care was provided to persons living in poverty. To enjoy that free care, such people needed only to report to their local authorities. The Agricultural Promotion Bank provided loans even to borrowers, including village women, who had no collateral.

Articles 15 and 16

48. **Ms. Hofmeister** said that she wished to know what obstacles prevented universal birth registration in the State party. She also asked what steps the State party intended to take to enforce its bans on polygamy and child marriage and whether communities and women's rights organizations were consulted on initiatives carried out in that connection. It would be useful to know whether gender-based violence in the domestic sphere was taken into account in child custody and visitation cases.

49. **Ms. Chantharanonh** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that the authorities had begun rebuilding the country's civil registration and vital statistics systems. Efforts in that respect had begun in Vientiane and would continue in the rest of the country's communities with the help of mobile registration units. Although child marriages were against the law, they still took place, mainly in rural areas. Campaigns had been launched to discourage such marriages, and there was a programme, run in an area where the tradition was to marry early, designed to help girls avoid getting pregnant before they turned 18. There was no polygamy in the country. Campaigns to combat gender-based violence had also been launched.

50. **Mr. Kittikhoun** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that he welcomed the Committee's views on the promotion and protection of women's rights in his country. Those views would encourage the country to continue making efforts to enhance the rights of women. In the years to come, the Lao People's Democratic Republic would also continue making efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and national development objectives. At the same time, every effort would be made to maintain peace, stability and order, without which women could not fully enjoy their rights.

51. The Lao People's Democratic Republic was committed to the view that all aspects of women's rights were universal, indivisible, interrelated and interdependent. Gender equality and the elimination of discrimination against women were nonetheless best achieved when they were an expression of the will of the people. Dialogue, including international dialogue, was thus critical.

The meeting rose at 4.50 p.m.